6: Anonymous U-4 (no date) 1956
FF52 Nupe FF52
Bida

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[title page]

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Bangles and bracelets of metal and glass, soup spoons of aluminium, all made in Bida

Glass-smiters of Bida

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Crafts of Bida

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IT is something of a shock to find that the traditional glass-making families of Bida, whilst working very much as they always have worked in their own quarter of the town, are now using beer bottles as their raw material. They melt the green and brown bottles from Britain, Denmark, Germany and Holland in the same wood-burning, hand-blown furnaces in which they used to make their own glass "from local sands and stones with a little ash". The romance has been damaged and some interesting technology will soon have been lost; but from the worker's point of view, the change can only be for the better.

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The brass-workers too are finding their materials among "European" scrap, and aluminium is creeping in as the metal for some of the cheaper lines. Yet once the Nupe blacksmiths' groups smelted their own iron in charcoal-fired blast furnaces, force-fed by hand bellows, from ore quarried in the sugarloaf hills which stand up abruptly from the plain around Bida.

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Once, these smiths fashioned the weapons for the raiding parties which, less than one hundred years ago, were able to terrorise both sides of the Niger valley from above Jebba to below the confluence of the Benue.

These military activities were, it seems, the main cause of a system of craft guilds in Bida which appears to have been as complete as any known in mediaeval Europe. Every aspect of production and supply appears to have been strictly controlled by the state to meet the state's requirements. The guilds of craftsmen in iron, leather, and embroidery

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"King of the dancers"—
a Bida brass spinning toy

Making a glass bangle. The bellows man sits behind the central furnace

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"King of the dancers" — A Bida brass spinning toy. FF52 Nupe FF52 'Bida

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The guilds of craftsmen in iron, leather, and embroidery made the weapons, armour, saddle-cloths and accoutrements for the army, the agricultural workers produced food and the glass-makers produced the ornaments which formed a basis of trade when that seemed more worth while than a military operation. As is usual in a state drawing most of its profits from war and plunder, there grew in Bida a great demand for luxuries—ornamental vessels, beads and armlets, especially among the women. Many young men of Bida state, ruefully, that this taste lingers on.

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This guild system was too rigid easily to withstand fundamental changes. The blacksmiths, declining in number, now confine themselves to farm implements and a few furnishings for horsemen. The brass makers turn out a wide range of flat and hollow-ware, much of it coming loosely within the luxury classification. The embroiderers turn out fine hand work on gowns and there is a beautifully decorated, bright red cloth woven by the women; but few are sold outside the town. Makers of hats and mats turn out a range of products now largely aimed at a Europeanised market.

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This falling-off of the traditional demand and an (at least) partial failure to find adequate new markets has already resulted in the loss of some skills and is a grave risk to the perpetuation of many others.

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The glass-makers, however, still work in their traditional way. The furnace is made from a clay pot heavily embedded in more clay. Into the base of the furnace are let two clay pipes of about two inches external diameter. These swell out to become bellows chambers some twelve or fifteen inches across closed by leather bags. One pumps away at them

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Workers in brass and silver. The goat-skin bellows are similar to those of the glass-makers

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No mechanical aids are used
to help achieve symmetry in design on trays

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Bida

Heavy silver bracelets of a type worn by the beauties of Bida for centuries

Good examples of Bida silver work attain a high standard of craftsmanship

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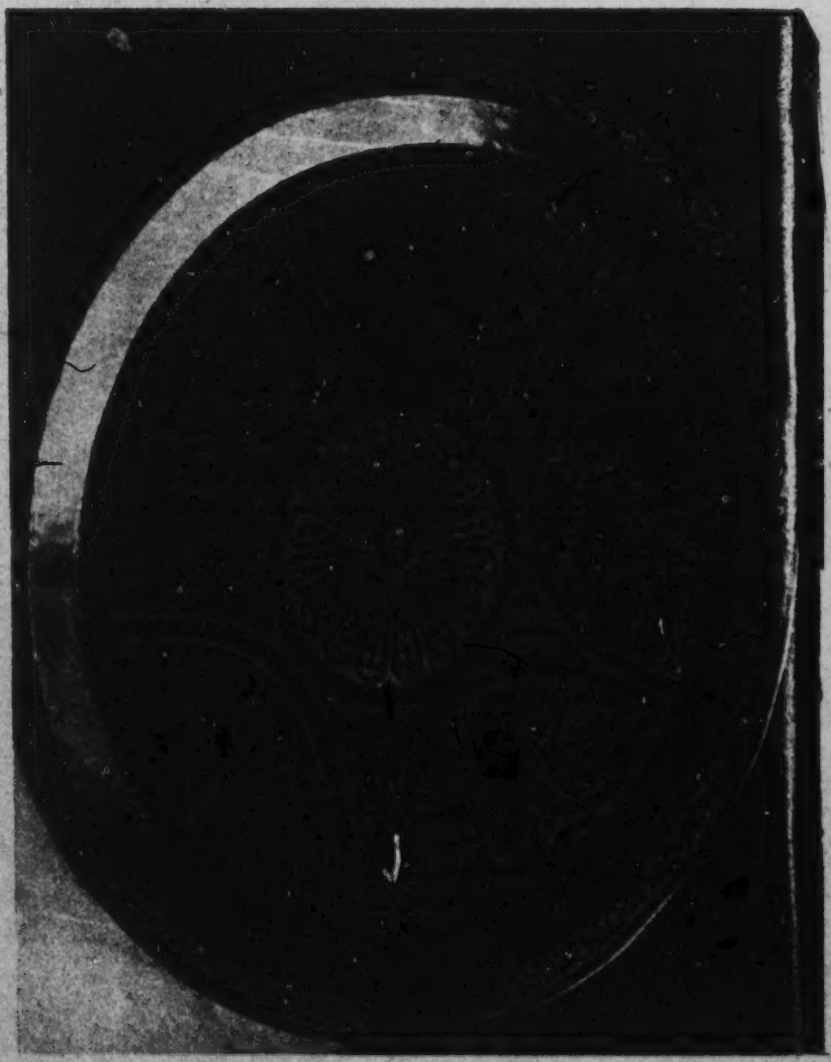

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Heavy silver bracelets of a type worn by the beauties of Bida for centuries.

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323 with the hands, in an up-and-down movement, for minutes on end with the speed and beat of a slow-running Diesel. The strength and stamina required for this job in the small, round entrance-houses to Bida compounds where these craftsmen work, must be colossal.

The glass-maker himself, a senior craftsman, throws a few handsful of dried wood into the furnace, the pump-man pumps, and soon a metal rod is brought to white heat. The end of this rod is then stuck into a few pieces of broken bottle which are then held in the flame until they begin to melt and become a shapeless but easily-workable mass.

Two rods are then used to separate a small lump of the half-molten glass. The lump is pierced and then waved round and round, still in the flame, until a jointless, glass bangle has been made. White patterns in the glass are made by the addition of white, liquid clay early in the spinning process.

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Punching designs on brass bowls.
No trace of the pattern is made before the punch work starts

323 Beads are made similarly, small amounts of molten glass being allowed to fall fixed distances to determine size and shape much as round shot used to be made in Europe.

223 439 This trade is suffering badly now. The products are very cheap, but they are in direct competition with more sophisticated, imported products.

One type of Bida bead is *not* cheap. It is very rare and is said to be made from "a sort of stone found a thousand miles away in the desert, only at one place. It is brought here only by women traders who go to Kano and Zinder to buy it from the desert people and very few know how to work on it". Accurate details are very difficult to come by, but this type of bead is very scarce and still greatly prized.

326 The brass workers fashion all but their most involved shapes on small anvils, beating rhythmically with a very small hammer. The patterns are made with a punch without any preliminary drawing of the intended pattern. As may be expected, the results vary but many are remarkably symmetrical and precise.

Much of the work is carried out in "silver", correctly coloured but bearing about as much likeness to real metal as does the average silver coinage. The Maria Theresa dollar, one of the traditional sources of [439] silver in the North, has been used as far south as Bida but the supply seems to be running out. In some places, craftsmen may be seen making Maria Theresa dollars . . .

Bida metal work is both interesting and disappointing at the same time. The folklore of the Nupe people makes many references to great skill in bronze casting and the Jebba bronzes are there to support the tale (*Nigeria* Magazine No. 43). There appears to be no casting now, though there remains an ability to make thin and very ductile metal sheet in a variety of alloys which can be worked over and over again without harm. Many of these metals have a quite surprising capacity to conduct heat, as anyone casually using a brass ash tray may quickly learn.

There is among the surviving guildsmen of Bida a reservoir of craftsmanship and familiarity with working glass, metals, leather and similar traditional materials. Without outside help, their skills will be lost and their young men will turn to other jobs. Perhaps there can never be an adequate, expanding market for their present products; but with a little help and advice, they could still be of greater value to their town and to Nigeria.